

VZCZCXRO8498  
RR RUEHCHI  
DE RUEHVN #0257/01 0880817  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 290817Z MAR 07  
FM AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1055  
INFO RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK 7223  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2144  
RUEHHI/AMEMBASSY HANOI 2829  
RUEHPF/AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH 1893  
RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON 2199  
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 0535  
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI  
RUEABND/DEA HQS WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 VIENTIANE 000257

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KCRM](#) [SNAR](#) [XC](#) [CH](#)

SUBJECT: NAS VIENTIANE: UPDATE ON METHAMPHETAMINE IN LAOS

11. (SBU) Summary. Almost everyone in the Lao lowlands, from the Prime Minister in Vientiane to street vendors in Pakse, is keenly aware that methamphetamine trafficking is on the increase and that the lives of thousands of Lao citizens have become more precarious as a result. Lao law enforcement agencies do not have the capacity to effectively interdict illicit drugs, but with sufficient training and equipment, could provide a significant deterrent. The Embassy and the Government of Laos (GOL) will focus existing law enforcement programs on the strategic golden triangle region of the northwest and the new Thailand-Vietnam highway that runs across Savannakhet Province. Demand reduction programs remain Laos' most effective tool against methamphetamine, but addict treatment capacity is still unsatisfactory. The Embassy and the GOL are preparing to launch a new drug awareness campaign that focuses on students as a means to stem the growth in ATS abuse. Methamphetamine addiction and associated crime appear to be increasing rapidly. End Summary.

12. (SBU) While it took decades for the GOL to acknowledge that opium was a serious problem that had to be addressed, Lao officials have been very proactive where ATS is concerned. The reason for this is that while methamphetamine addiction is penetrating all levels of Lao society, it is disproportionately impacting the urban middle class and the communist party elite. Even professionals in the counter narcotics field have found that their families are not immune. Consequently, the issue has great resonance and anti-ATS programs have unflinching support from the majority of GOL officials.

LAW ENFORCEMENT  
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13. (SBU) The law enforcement agencies of Laos do not have the capacity that they need to combat methamphetamine trafficking and transit. The problems posed by corruption, long and porous borders, large neighbors who produce and consume ATS, and growing internal demand for yaa baa (methamphetamine) have combined to overwhelm the police. The majority of officers lack even the most rudimentary of investigative skills, do not know how to conduct a suspect interview (without employing force), and often find themselves short of standard police equipment (handcuffs, flashlights, body armor). The GOL currently has no counter-drug intelligence capability, and consequently has no

information where the ATS entering Laos comes from or what organizations are involved. All of this makes Laos a perfect transit route for major traffickers, as there is no significant threat of interdiction against any drugs or chemicals smuggled through Laos.

¶4. (SBU) Fortunately, law enforcement agencies in Laos can be trained. The Customs Department, which cooperates effectively with the U.S., has demonstrated a relatively high level of motivation and competence with regard to drug interdiction. Some provincial Counter Narcotics Units (CNU) have been so effective against street dealers that officers are now receiving death threats, and one officer in Udomxay proudly shows off the bullet wounds he suffered in a successful ATS raid.

¶5. (SBU) The Embassy and Lao National Commission for Drug Control and Supervision (LCDC) have agreed in principle to a new law enforcement strategy that will focus limited law enforcement program resources where they are needed most. UNODC and the GOL have identified the region of Northwest Laos that is bordered by China, Burma, and Thailand as a strategic zone for the interdiction of illicit drug trafficking. Heroin and methamphetamine enter Laos here from Burma for transit to Thailand, Vietnam, China, and other nations in the region. Precursor chemicals for the production of ATS move from China to Burma through this part of Laos. USG funded law enforcement assistance will target primarily Counter Narcotics Units (CNUs) and Customs posts in Bokeo, Luang Namtha, and Udomxay provinces. In addition the CNU and Customs post in Savannakhet will receive extra funding as they attempt to control trafficking between Vietnam and Thailand on the East-West Economic corridor that

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runs across the recently opened Savannakhet-Mukdahan Bridge. CNUs and customs offices in other areas will continue to receive sufficient support to sustain operations.

¶6. (SBU) What the officers in counter-narcotics agencies need are the skills, tools, and information necessary to do their jobs. A good first step would be to pay the police an appropriate salary, comparable to what they could receive in the private sector, approximately \$200-400 per month (a typical salary for security guards in Vientiane). The majority of junior officers now receive only \$20-40 per month, an open invitation to corruption. Better training would also help, though Laos is not without training resources. China provided training for several dozen narcotics officers in 2005-2006. Laos participates in programs at the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) Bangkok, and may receive additional USG supported training as funding allows. Embassy Vientiane is also providing essential equipment to CNUs, albeit in limited quantities. The greatest challenge for USG law enforcement programs in Laos is the lack of cooperation between GOL agencies and the difficulty of convincing Ministry of Public Security (MOPS) officials that U.S. offers of assistance are sincere with no hidden agenda.

#### DEMAND REDUCTION

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¶7. (U) The GOL realizes that its law enforcement agencies are not currently able to bring ATS trafficking under control, and that demand reduction programs are the only viable way to stem the growth of methamphetamine abuse. In a series of seminars given throughout the country, LCDC Chairman Soubanh Sririthirath has emphasized that officials need to find home-grown solutions to ATS, and that officials should not wait for external assistance that is unlikely to come. Soubanh is particularly eager to undertake drug education programs that might help to stem the growth of methamphetamine addiction among students, probably the best hope that Laos has of reducing ATS abuse under the current circumstances.

¶8. (SBU) At the same time, Minister Soubanh has indicated that he is more than willing to work with any donor that can provide some assistance. Fortunately, the number of potential donors appears to be on the rise, as evidenced by the opening of new provincial treatment centers funded by Thailand, China, and Brunei. Unfortunately, however, these Programs tend to lack the quality control that is built into U.S.-funded programs. The Thai treatment center has serious structural problems, and Brunei is facing funding gaps after stretching its funding to build two facilities instead of one first-rate one. (Note: See para 13 for further details on problems in provincial centers.)

#### 2007 Lao National ATS Awareness Campaign

¶9. (U) The Embassy and LCDC have agreed to use approximately \$120,000.00 of demand reduction funds to support the Programme Facilitation Units, (PFU) 2007 ATS Civic Awareness Campaign. Unlike some of the campaigns in previous years, all of the sub-elements of this year's campaign will be coordinated to deliver a single unified anti-drug theme. The major components of this year's campaign will include:

--Nationwide classroom instruction using printed materials from D.A.R.E., GTZ (German Government aid agency), and the Lao Ministry of Education. Each lesson module will also have supplementary materials on a video compact disc. Provincial Committees for Drug Control (PCDC) will each receive VCD players and projectors to support classroom instruction (1 set per province).

--Drug awareness pamphlets for general distribution, and VCDs of popular Lao artists performing anti-drug songs.

--Sporting goods, imprinted with an anti-drug message that will promote a healthy lifestyle and constructive extracurricular activities.

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--Centralized train-the-trainer programs for the teachers and local officials who will carry out the awareness campaign. The training will include proper use of the instructional materials and equipment that the campaign will provide.

--Public service announcements on radio and television.

#### Addiction

¶10. (SBU) According to the GOL, Laos has approximately 40,000 methamphetamine addicts. The GOL reached this estimate based on data collected by village administrators, compiled the district level, reported by the provinces, and finally tabulated nationally. Even LCDC lacks confidence in this number, as it relies on village officials to report accurately a statistic that may reflect poorly on their performance. In one conversation that the NAS had with the medical director of a modest provincial treatment clinic, she stated that villages were underreporting addicts by at least 33%. The NAS believes that nationally, there could easily be as many as 200,000 ATS users, though not all of these are hard core addicts. The GOL, UNODC, the NAS have all noted that while there are no reliable numbers on the growth of ATS trafficking and abuse, an abundance of anecdotal evidence suggests that the situation is continuing to deteriorate.

¶11. (U) Unfortunately the national ATS treatment capacity is less than 1200 beds or 2400 patients per year even if every space available were used. Effective treatment capacity, taking into consideration the number of fully trained staff, appropriate patient density, and currently available funding, is not more than 600 at one time or 1200 per year.

¶12. (U) The Somsagna Treatment Center in Vientiane, operated

by the city, is the nation's largest facility, with a normal resident population of between 500 and 700 men and 20 to 40 women. Capacity there will increase by 128 following the USG funded renovation of the women's rehabilitation wing. The renovated dormitory will feature a much lower and more therapeutically effective patient density; were all of the existing Somsagna structures rebuilt to this standard, the total patient load, including the new wing, would not exceed 1500. Somsagna has the most capable and experienced staff in the nation and other facilities send their staffs there for training (paid for in some cases by the Embassy).

¶13. (SBU) Within Laos, addict treatment is a provincial responsibility, and the national government does not have a budget to support treatment centers. Thailand, the U.S., and China constructed new 100 bed treatment facilities respectively in Pakse, Savannakhet, and Udomxay. Brunei built two clinics in Xaignaboury Province, each rated at 70 beds, but in truth able to hold no more than 30 apiece. All of these facilities have opened in the past 15 months, and were handed over to their respective Provincial governments for operation, but none are fully functional. The reasons for this are:

--Other than the U.S. center in Savannakhet, none were handed over complete with furniture and medical supplies, and the provinces did not allocate funds to furnish the facilities.

--Addicts' families lack confidence in the proficiency of the staffs, and send patients to the Somsagna instead.

--Provinces allocated budgets too small to operate the facilities, and charge patients too much for many to afford.

¶14. (SBU) Minister Soubanh has publicly acknowledged that the new centers' financial problems, and has suggested that Laos create a national trust fund for their support. Until that is in place, the GOL should consider upgrading Somsagna, the one facility that is fully utilized (approximately 185% of optimum capacity) before looking at new venues for treatment centers that provincial governments will be challenged to support.

#### CRIME

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¶15. (SBU) The perception among many urban Lao that violent crime is on the increase is the most obvious indicator of how ATS trafficking is impacting Lao society. Accurate statistics on violent crime are not readily available from the GOL, and even homicides often go unreported in the press.

Word of a February 28 home invasion in an upscale Vientiane neighborhood circulated widely on the streets, but was never mentioned in the media. In this particular case, a methamphetamine addict apparently in need a fix killed two elderly women in a desperate robbery attempt, then slit his own throat when the police, alerted by neighbors, confronted the man before he had an opportunity to make his getaway.

¶16. (SBU) The double homicide came only a few months after two expatriate NGO staff members were assaulted with machetes by a group of four young men in central Vientiane. The tourist areas of Vientiane are now frequented by young thieves seeking to pick a pocket or snatch a bag. For the first time in decades, youth gangs have appeared on the capital's streets. Members of the diplomatic community have reported thefts by their household staffs. In those relatively rare cases where investigation provides some insight into the motivation behind these crimes, the need to pay for the ATS addiction of the perpetrator or a relative almost always emerges as a primary cause. Though there are all too few reliable statistics on crime or addiction, petty theft, violent crime, and methamphetamine abuse all appear to be rising in parallel.

¶17. (SBU) Comment. Methamphetamine has now become Laos' greatest illicit drug program, eclipsing opium. Future U.S. assistance to Laos may need to focus more heavily on law enforcement and demand reduction programs than in the past. The situation is not beyond rescue, and the right combination of aid and regional cooperation could help to bring ATS back under control. End comment.  
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